

Tucson Citizen

Az panel backs 1¢ sales tax for new roads

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Ready for a transportation sales tax, toll roads or highways operated by private investors?

All three could be in Arizona's future as state transportation officials confront exploding infrastructure needs at a time of dwindling federal funding for maintenance and improvement projects.

A measure to put a 1-cent sales tax on the November ballot to raise \$42 billion over 30 years for transportation needs is being pushed by a coalition of state officials and business leaders.

If the tax is approved, major highway projects for Pima County could include widening Interstate 19 to eight lanes to the Pima-Santa Cruz counties line, widening State Route 77 to six lanes from Tangerine Road to the county line, and extending State Route 210 from Alvernon Way to Valencia Road.

The proposed initiative was given a vote of support Thursday by the State Transportation Board during a special meeting in Tucson.

"Arizona is facing a transportation funding crisis that requires a shift in the way we think about growth and an innovative approach to invest in our future," Victor Mendez, director of the Arizona Department of

Transportation, said recently.

Gov. Janet Napolitano has endorsed the initiative.

To get it on the ballot, backers of the Statewide Transportation Investment Strategy initiative need to gather the signatures of at least 153,000 voters statewide by July 3.

"We already have that number," said Martin L. Shultz, co-chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Moving AZ's Economy, or TIME, coalition of industry and business interests that is circulating the ballot petitions.

Shultz, vice president for government affairs for Pinnacle West Capital Corp., said more signatures will be gathered to serve as a buffer against challenges to disqualify signatures.

The state could lose up to \$228.4 million in federal Highway Trust Fund revenues in 2009 - its share of an overall \$3.3 billion deficit the federal agency is projected to incur next year, Mendez said.

Traditional revenue streams that helped pay for maintenance of existing infrastructure and construction of new improvements have been drying up, creating a crisis that has officials nationwide scrambling to find new funding, Mendez said.

Both Arizona and the federal government collect 18 cents per gallon in gasoline taxes every time a motorist uses a fuel pump. Neither the federal government nor the state has increased gasoline taxes in 18 years

The long-term plan that would be funded by the penny sales tax would include not only major highway improvements, but also high-speed passenger rail between Tucson and Phoenix, streetcar or rapid-transit bus service here, and expanded light rail in Phoenix.

The sales tax was selected as the funding mechanism after a study by the

coalition, said S.L. Schorr, chairman of the State Transportation Board.

"There was a poll and we found out that a gas tax increase was not a good idea," Schorr said.

At Thursday's board hearing, some members of the public voiced concerns the plan was too focused on roads, might harm critical habitats and wildlife, and might be rejected by voters.

"We're in bad times right now," Richard Basye, a member of the Pima Taxpayers Association, told the board.

The sales tax would take effect in January 2010 if it is on the November ballot and approved by voters.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Possible projects in Pima County

Major highways

- I-10: Widen to six lanes from I-19 junction to Houghton Road: \$198 million
- I-19: Widen to eight lanes from Tucson to the Santa Cruz County line: \$1.08 billion
- State Route 77: Widen to six lanes from Tangerine Road to the county line: \$59 million
- State Route 86: Widen to four lanes from Kinney to Kitt Peak turnoff: \$247 million
- State Route 210: Extension from Alvernon Way to Valencia Road: \$295 million
- Sahuarita Road from Mission Road to junction of State Route 86: \$231 million

Transit: Total: \$2.7 billion

- Connecting communities bus transit program: \$20 million
- Transit serving the elderly, people with disabilities and tribal populations in rural areas: \$43 million
- Statewide Vanpool and Rideshare programs: \$61.3 million
- Transit/rail planning, marketing and other related programs: \$4.9 million
- High-speed intercity rail/commuter rail/light rail
- High-speed urban rail connections
- Commuter rail in urban corridors: \$1.4 billion
- Light rail, modern streetcar and related high-capacity transit: \$1.9 million

Local projects and programs

Pima County: \$500 million
Marana: \$23 million
Oro Valley: \$34 million
Sahuarita: \$12 million
South Tucson: \$4.8 million

Tucson: \$555.7 million

Pascua Yaqui Tribe: \$3.3 million

Tohono O'odham Nation \$9.6 million

Transportation enhancement and walkable/bicyclable communities

Pima County: \$91.8 million

Marana: \$7.4 million

Oro Valley \$10.98 million

Sahuarita: \$3.9 million

South Tucson: \$1.5 million

Tucson: \$14.7 million

Pascua Yaqui Tribe: \$925,000

Tohono O'odham Nation: \$2.6 million

ON THE WEB

To see the statewide plan at the Arizona Department of Transportation:

www.azdot.gov